15: Nakane E-5 (1955-1956) 1967 AR7 Khasi AR7

Shella

Confederacy forms a more marked endogamous community, through being cut off geographically and economically from the rest of the Khasi, and socially from the neighbouring Hindu people. 621

The Economy and the People.

Shella lies along the upper part of the Shella River and stretches upwards along the steep slope, looking down towards the Bengal plain. The climate of this part of the hills is considered to be one of the worst in tropical India for human habitation. The Bengal plain, though warmer than this area, is considered more healthy. This border land is the zone of malaria, typhoid, black fever, cholera, etc. None of the Bengalee peasants dare to live in such an area. However, it is the most fertile for products such as betel-nuts, pan-leaves, oranges, bananas and pineapples, and it also produces limestone. These people seem to prefer to settle in this zone and to enjoy its prosperity, at the expense of human lives: every year, especially between March and September, the inhabitants suffer from various fevers and dysentry and other diseaes, many of the weaker facing death. 131 132 164 433 164 648

Before the Partition of India and Pakistan, the products of Shella were carried down the Shella River to Sylhet, one of the biggest centres in East Bengal, which brought unimaginable wealth to the Shella people. Their houses were built by carpenters from Sylhet. The style and structure of these houses were exceptionally elaborate for the Khasi. They purchased vast rice fields in the plain, which used to be cultivated by Bengalee and Garo labourers engaged by them. These Khasi do not themselves know how to cultivate rice fields; they have always been managers or landowners. Their boys used to be sent to high schools and colleges in Sylhet. As a result of their trading with the Bengalee, many of them read and speak fluent Bengalee. There is no difference between their style of clothing and that of the Bengalee, though the women maintain their traditional dress in the Shella style. 177 178 434 [439] [342] [166] [464] [871] [191] [291]

They have thus been distinguished from the rest of the Khasi not only geographically, but also economically and culturally. Their personality also differs sharply from the rest of the Khasi. They are very sociable, and quick, a quality lacking among the Khasi of Sohkynduh and Kongton. They are clever enough to deal with strangers. The upland Khasi say Shella people are very cunning. This remark shows one side of these people. They had to be cunning, since they traded with the Sylhet Bengalee who were said to be the most cunning of their race. Their role in the trade and in the history of the modernization of the Hills was considerable. For centuries they represented intellectual Khasi owing to their contact with Hindu civilization, while the Hills remained in darkness. They assumed an important role when the British established an administration in the Hills, and even up to now, many leading Khasi originated from this area: for instance, Lati Hat, the first interpreter of the British Headquarters at Cherrapunjee; Jeebon Roy, who was the first Magistrate among the Khasi; Maham Sing, a lawyer and Member of the Legislative Assembly (the grandson of Jeebon Roy); Nichols Roy, Minister of Health and Prisons of the Assam Government, Member of the Legislative Assembly, and Missionary of the Church of God; R. R. Thomas (brother of Nichols Roy), Principal of the Gauhati University, etc. 157 184 648 177 178 [439]

Through constant cultural contact with Hindu, and encouraged by their economic prosperity, the Shella Khasi, like the Jaintias, have been much influenced by Hindu culture. However, this does not mean that the people of Shella adopted the Hindu beliefs. Though there is a small Hindu shrine, and some ceremonial elements were borrowed from the Hindu, most of the 177 648 771 795

15: Nakane E-5 (1955-1956) 1967 AR7 Khasi AR7

spade or some dried fish, etc. Products such as large quantities of fruits should be sold to the Jatinga people who buy them at reasonable prices. 182

The Khasi are born traders. This must be closely related with their economic technique, such as pan cultivation which makes it impossible for them to live without trading. Hence, though they are hill people, they have had close economic contact with the peoples of the surrounding plains. At the same time, some of them have had a very similar economy to that of other tribes, such as that of Sohkynduh and of Kongton; hence they are familiar with tribal economy. On the whole, their dealings with the tribes as well as with the plains peoples are fair, though they are hard bargainers. Indeed the Khasi are quite welcomed by both sides. Thus the Khasi play an important role as intermediary between the tribes living in the hills and the Hindu (and Moslems) living in the plains.[1] 44 648

The economic contact is the most important of the many contacts between Jatinga and other tribal villages. Social contact, as appeared in intermarriages, is a rather marginal matter for the total population. Cultural contact is negligible: I only observed one indication—some fashionable tribal girls sometimes wear Khasi women's dress when they go to the Haflong bazaar. In their contact with tribes, the Jatinga Khasi speak Hindi which is the common language at Haflong bazaar for all tribes and peoples in this area. A few men of Jatinga speak some tribal language, but none of the tribal speak the Khasi language. 648 182 [191]

In spite of such great differences in culture, economy and social organization, the relationship between the Jatinga people and the tribes has remained very friendly. For instance, as I mentioned before (p. 175, note 3), the tribes lent their land to Jatinga people who were suffering from a great economic depression. Their actual behaviour also reflects such a friendly relationship. It is said that at the time of the Golden Jubilee of Jatinga in November 1955, many Zemi-Naga, Kuki, and Cacharee came and performed their dances for the celebration.

1. The important role of the Khasi as intermediary is not only in the economic field, but also in the political and cultural fields: nowadays many Khasi officers are sent to tribal areas by the Government. They are very efficient in dealing with such work, because they are used to deal with both tribal and plain peoples.

[P. 178 is blank]